

Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred by Jeffrey J. Kripal. University of Chicago Press, 2010. 332 pp. \$37.50 (hardcover). ISBN 9780226453866.

Jeffrey Kripal is the J. Newton Rayzor Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University; he has written a book one may choose to take as medicine meant to revive a mortally ill academic discipline. It is generally known that departments of religious studies in university life are run by atheists, materialists, and Marxists, folks who pretty much share the same stultifying assumptions about the divine, the sacred, the afterlife, the spiritual life, psychical research, mysticism, extraordinary healing, the super-rational, the creative power of the imagination, and a whole spectrum of ignored, damned, and forbidden branches of human experience.

In direct opposition to that form of exclusive reductionism, Kripal has written a book that insists on bringing the psychical dimension into the discourse about religion and spirituality. He wants to open up religious studies to the extraordinary, the fantastic—the *impossible*. What Kripal means by his title—on the surface it is merely enigmatic or ironical—the reader discovers in context. His peculiar notion of “the impossible” needs to be exhibited in its living context, if one hopes to grasp its meaning.

Crucial to Kripal’s argument, as it was for James, Lang, Myers, and DeVesme, was the claim that as you reach back to the origins of what we call “religion” you are likely to arrive at a point of origin in some extraordinary, psychical experience, mystical, paranormal, or both. The origins of all the great religions are replete with tales of supernormality in action. For historically intelligible reasons, however, there is little research or writing on the psychical origins of religion.

There is of course a problem with the idea of studying “religion” objectively and rationally; people are emotionally invested in their religious views and anti-views. What happens when ideology undermines the objective standpoint demanded by academic standards? For example, it seems reasonable to think that the academic study of religion requires a well-rounded sensitivity, a feel for the subject matter, for the stories, the concrete phenomenology, and for the accounts of the exceptional, often strange or bizarre, events that drive religious belief systems. Suppose, for example, your main passion is the political, racial, and gender side of any story? Harold Bloom kvetches about “The School of Resentment” in English studies. Professional studies of literature become battlefields for partisan politics, and the poetics of spirit, miracle, adoration, ascetic self-mastery, and mystical rapture are damned. Or consider the academic study of psychology (now called neuroscience):

The notion of psyche is reduced to an item of folklore; the neuron and the computer are deified. With a faint glimmer of hope, consciousness lingers on as mysterial irritation. Finally, I might mention professional philosophy, no longer interested in "love of wisdom"—which is what the word *philosophy* means. What's going on here? Are these items of self-alienation symptoms of what Vico called the "barbarism of reflection"—the perversions that arise from the inhuman use of reason and rationality—the ultimate disenchantment of life?

Kripal's animating thought, as I read it, is that there is a way to fight this psychical disenchantment, this decay of vital imagination. The way back to the lost dimension of the sacred is through the portal of the paranormal. (The subtitle of the book is *The Paranormal and the Sacred*.) Kripal emphasizes throughout the need for a bifocal view, "The One in Two" ethos of coinciding opposites: The scholar, any pilgrim of the impossible, must be a delicate receiving apparatus with, at the same time, the eagle's critical eye at all times scanning the great horizon. In solemnly willed acts, one must lay aside reductive biases, advert to pure consciousness, and look to the moments of extraordinary experience: the sacralizing, energizing, expansive, exalted—the *most transformative experiences*—as the starting points for one's scholarly, rational, imaginative response to the great issues of religion. (Scholarly loathers of religion typically begin with the most degrading.)

Now, these moments of creative advance that constitute the soul of "religion" sometimes crystallize with special vividness in and around certain individuals. Kripal considers four case histories that point to models of spiritual evolution for the future. Four authors of the "impossible" are presented and discussed. This is a book for people interested in re-imagining and re-ensouling some of the life-serving ideas of "religion." Jeffrey Kripal, like William Blake, wants to restore not just imagination but the majesty of the imaginal to the old gray house of religious studies. He would have religious scholars hone their visionary skills. He would rouse them to erotic participation with their subject matter, urging them to graduate from Apollonian episteme to Dionysian gnosis. Kripal quotes in a kindly vein Henri Bergson's jolting utterance that the universe is a machine for creating gods.

Kripal's four authors of the impossible are Frederic Myers, Charles Fort, Jacques Vallee, and Bertrand Meheust. These are authors whose work aids Kripal in authoring himself, and he is happy to make the process of that as transparent with detail and nuance as possible. One of Kripal's *topoi* that he keeps returning to is postmodern, even for that matter a theme central to analytic and linguistic philosophy. Perhaps it goes back to Heidegger who said that *Die Sprache is das Haus des Seins*, "Language is the house of being" (Heidegger, 1957). So, Kripal reminds us, we must ask, Who is writing our story? Are we not being written,

written over, written off? Are we not in thrall to prevailing concepts, assumptions, scripts, codes, symbols, thus cornered in our little cultural niche. What writes us is the merely possible; to write ourselves, tell our own story, we have to break free from the dead weight of history, and accomplish the impossible. This, if I understand our author, is what "religion"—the aspect of it in tune with evolutionary advance—is most authentically about.

Each of the four authors contribute something to the larger process that interests Kripal, namely, the authoring of the impossible, which is Kripal-code for inducing breakthroughs of consciousness beyond the mundane to the sacred. Myers' contribution is to build a "spectrum" psychology that ranges from the normal to the abnormal and supernormal. Myers is a fitting ally for Kripal's impossible authorings; Myers was a poet, a classical scholar, and a literary critic. One of his great contributions was the terminology he invented for the study of consciousness. Myers invented (or brought to prominence) the terms *telepathy*, *supernormal*, *subliminal*, *preversion*, *mythopoeic*, *imaginal*, *secondary personality*, *phantasmogenetic*, and so forth. These terminological additions are tools for registering, ordering, and integrating impossible realities. Myers was not only a poet but also a romantic psychologist and erotic thinker. The eroticism and romanticism of Myers come together in his creation of a new science, a new psychology that stretches our conception of the human personality to quite impossible (and therefore fascinating) dimensions; the human personality that emerges from the crucible of Myers' spectrum psychology is steeped in transcendent heights and depths, reaching into unknown worlds even after the death of the body. According to Kripal, Myers was inspired to create this new science of consciousness because of his dead lover, who embodied for Myers a Platonic vision of eternal beauty and creativity. Myers lived an impossible life, impeccably married to his wife, Eveleen, while madly in love with the image of Annie waiting for him in the beyond. Some might regard this as more of a danger than a plus, but Myers' "subliminal Self" is a conceptual tool that permits us to imagine impossible love, and the complexities of passion in the metaphysical world of Andrew Marvell. In general, says Kripal, Myers's vastly enlarged model of the human psyche, unlike Freud's and even Jung's, helps us "explain religious experiences without explaining them away" (p. 62).

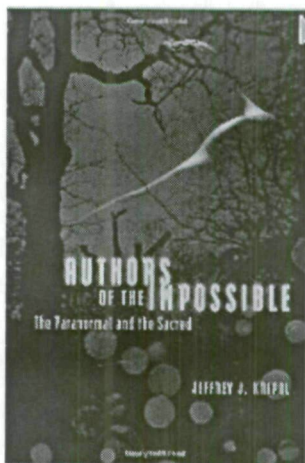
Kripal's discussion of evolution and the paranormal in Myers is useful; Myers' challenge was to incorporate evolutionism without swallowing materialism. He rejected the idea that telepathy arose from some juggling of hereditary factors; rather, evolution led to a "revelation" of telepathy when it rose from the subliminal to the supraliminal level of consciousness. Kripal underscores the spiritual and erotic dimensions of telepathy as Myers understood and lived them. Myers' intense love affair with Annie Marshall sheds light on his passionate pursuit of the psychical as the key to the mysteries of existence.

Looking for the authentic roots of religiosity in the erotic and psychical dimensions of consciousness marks an important trend toward a more full-bodied, anti-dualist conception of religious reality. It might well turn out to be the crucial step toward new forms of self-conceived religiosity. Kripal keeps pushing the envelope, alerting us to the need—and the possibilities—for world-re-enchantment.

Kripal's second exemplar of authoring the impossible is the American philosopher and collector of scientific anomalies, Charles Fort (1874–1932). Fort caught the imagination of several literary figures in the early twentieth century (Booth Tarkington, Theodore Dreiser, etc.), and one can see why: The Bronx original, at his best, wrote scientific criticism that sometimes sounded like the poet Arthur Rimbaud. (We might perhaps call him the Walt Whitman of the Impossible.) Fort, I would say, wrote the kind of surrealist narratives that Breton imagined, seamless fusions of dream and reality. Here is the first sentence of *Lo!* "A naked man in a city street—the track of a horse in volcanic mud—the mystery of reindeer's ears—a huge, black form, like a whale in the sky, and it drips red drops as if attacked by celestial swordfishes—an appalling cherub appears in the sea—*Confusions.*"

It goes on like this for a while, and we read: "A naked fact startles a meeting of a scientific society—and whatever it has for loins is soon diapered with conventional explanations" (Fort, 1974:541). Kripal writes a searching account of the four main books of Fort, highlighting a number of imaginative ways of viewing the world conducive to the possibility of the sacred, naming it "Scattering the Seeds of a Super-Story." Kripal's chapter title reminds us of a point of contention in current intellectual life. It is fair to say that in the postmodern mood, one is obliged to look askance upon all talk of grand historical laws, trends, or destinies; no one great, all-powerful point of view that explains and fancies it can control everything. So the idea of a "super-story" may seem suspect to many. Kripal, I am sure, is not interested in foisting some one super-story, sacred or profane, on the wild diversity of humankind.

As individuals, however, we may need to form, however fallible and makeshift, some one, or several, super-stories for ourselves. We all need rafts, as the Buddha said, to ford the sea of existence; it must, however, be our own raft. Kripal thinks that a good way to free yourself from the deadening script you have been given is to write your own script, arming yourself with the widest possible range of facts, including the wildest of anomalies, but insisting



upon your own reading, interpretation, and reconfiguring. The point is to live our super-story. ("Religion" is always intensely personal when it's authentic.) While not coming off as preachy, Kripal, an adversary of spiritual dullness, invites us to freely rewrite the story imposed on us (in the double sense of *imposed*). It was a great day when Jefferson verbalized our inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Kripal, speaking loud and clear to all fanatics, fundamentalists, and reductionists, is now telling us that we each have a right to author our own impossible lives. Jefferson would have approved.

Among the many ideas discussed in this chapter, I'll mention one that speaks to the current scene. Fort imagines three Dominants or Eras. The first Era is that of traditional religion, exclusive, and creed-driven; second, today's Dominant is scientific materialism, obsessed with explanation and control. And beyond now there is *tertium quid*. The New Dominant, Kripal writes, "he (Fort) associates with the epistemology of expression or acceptance and the professionalism of a new brand of individuating wizards and witches" (p. 113). A mark of the New Dominant is its spirit of radical inclusiveness. According to Kripal, "it (the New Dominant) builds an open-ended system and preserves it through the confusing inclusion of data, theoretically *all* data, however bizarre and offending, toward some future awakening" (p. 113). Kripal seems intent on opening new pathways from the paranormal to the sacred. The last extraordinary sentence points to a model of peace arrived at by the road of creative chaos—a road that travels toward fusion through fructifying confusion. Fort provides the second exemplary opus for authoring the impossible.

The remaining two authors are contemporary Frenchmen. Jacques Vallee is a scientist, novelist, computer entrepreneur, and leading figure in ufological studies. The UFO phenomenon is linked in many ways to the psychical and the sacred, and, as Vallee showed, to the realm of folklore. The religious connections are confusing. I have a written account of an American artist who joined her religious friend on a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. In an area where the Virgin appeared to certain young visionaries in the 1980s, Miss X observed a structure of lights hovering in space that appeared to her like a spaceship; she drew a picture of it, a geometric pattern of lights; it certainly looks like the classic light-grid craft of ufology. It turned out that others in the group also saw the strange lights, but were at first too disturbed to discuss it. In the literature of alien abduction (Mack, 1999), abductees invariably describe telepathic communication with the aliens. The vast UFO lore and literature is saturated with reports indicative of all kinds of psychic hijinks.

So the connections with psi and religion are present. Vallee's account of what is going on in UFO-land provides a conceptual apparatus we can use to deconstruct the prevailing worldview and reconstruct the space of the possible. For one thing, the multi-dimensionality of existence must be a shock to people

of flatland sensibility. In the ancient world, Socrates administered shock therapy to the prevailing consciousness through a new form of language use called dialectic. Later on, not that far away, another shock was administered to human consciousness; the news spread relentlessly—a man was raised from the dead by a divine power. In the Resurrection, a new belief was created, which promised eternal life. This became the nucleus of a movement still going strong. And now what? Jung relates UFOs to the death of the gods, the return of the repressed. The UFO phenomenon—a devastating form of Socratic *aporia*—imposes itself upon witness or abductee. But what is it? One's sense of reality is attacked. One is forced to ask fundamental questions about what is—*really* is. One is forced to enroll, as it were, in Jacques Vallee's Invisible College. What is the UFO phenomenon? A creature of the twilight zone, betwixt and between, on the border between fact and fiction? Inner or outer? Super science or science fiction? A hyphenated mode of being? Either? All? None? Confusion, as Fort said.

To describe this edge of reality demands a new syntax, a new koan, a new *Finnegan's Wake*. Here is how Kripal broadly suggests we consider our cognitive vapors: "The point is not to reduce one 'false' register to the other 'true' one. It is to confuse and destabilize *both* registers. Put more radically, the point is not to adopt this or that symbolic system as somehow literally true. The point is to be simultaneously sympathetic to and suspicious of *all* symbolic systems, and then finally to entertain the impossible possibility that the controlling intelligence communicating with us through all these systems is a human one, that is, a form of human consciousness far beyond our present, hopelessly materialistic and restrictive notions. We are not who we seem to be."

In reflecting on Kripal's vision of the self-authoring-authorizing process, it must be hard if you suffer from a fundamentalist cast of mind, one feature of which is the obsession with disjunctive logic. Kripal's fourth model of instigating psychical revivalism is Bertrand Meheust, who pursues his impossibilities in the multiple, unpredictable depths of somnambulism—dream walking, ambulating in sleep. The title of the chapter is clear enough: "Returning the Human Sciences to Consciousness." Kripal writes of the "naïve objectivism of the scientific method with respect to paranormal phenomena" (p. 227) whose unfortunate effect is to kill the phenomena. Nietzsche of course was right; "God is dead; *we* have killed him." The objectifying approach of the rational scientist probably creates the milieu that is lethal to paranormality.

In studying the variety of dissociated, "magnetic," or mesmerized states—with a special focus on Alexis Didier—Meheust observed that the phenomena are anarchic and fugitive. Many will find this discomfiting. However, there is a vital point that Kripal wants to make: The "phenomena, this boundless reservoir of potentialities, should profoundly transform our image of the human being, and consequently render any final model of human nature, and so any general or

universal method of therapy, impossible" (p. 227). On the same page, Meheust is quoted as stating this key point for practicing authors of the impossible, "... the phenomena of somnambulism are not invariable manifestations of the human soul, but . . . they should be thought of as the actualization of hidden virtualities—an actualization rendered possible in certain contexts, and therefore variable." This elasticity of effect ought instantly to enlarge confidence in our latent powers. However, beside the erotic and the numinous, there is a dark side somnambulism, or walking into the world of dreams. The Fortean and ufological dimension, along with somnambulism, nightmare, and haggling, enlarge but also darken ambiguously our understanding of the repressed sacred. Myers of course knew that the subliminal self housed a dark side, but believed, some would say with Victorian overconfidence, the light of intelligence would show the way. In any case, Kripal is right to pay attention to the dark, subterranean, deceptive side of the sacred world. One cannot get very far there without bumping into all sorts of shadow figures, adversaries, and devils of all stripes. All this new, edgy personnel is grist for authoring and self-authorizing. It seems almost common sense to say that any conception of the evolution of self without integrating the Shadow will fall short.

This book, despite an occasional extempore breeziness, is densely scholarly, well-argued, and boldly intuited. Kripal is interested in bringing literary studies into paranormal hermeneutics. Above all—and here he seems to be addressing his comrade "religion" scholars—there is a Blakean call for Imagination. He is also interested in reading the signs of popular culture for their sacred or profaning events, images, and trends. Isn't that what the prophets of old did? Since popular culture, its many worlds and personae, is a creation of the human psyche (no matter how many clever machines mediate that creation), *its* products also have religious significance. In Kripal's generous vision, a more wildly motley crew of possibles will be allowed to enter into the world of conversation.

Besides hermeneutics and imagination, Kripal respects the neurophysical challenge to his theory of religion, which relies on consciousness and some of its stranger effects. Kripal is armed and ready to deal with this, and throughout refers to, and sometimes elaborates on, a theory of the mind-brain relationship that several writers have expounded upon. Sometimes referred to as the transmission model, or "filter" theory, the main appeal is that it's consistent with psychical data; whereas, if we accept the mainline views the whole enterprise that speaks of the mental, the conscious, and the spiritual is more or less dead in the water.

So Kripal interprets the brain as an instrument for focusing the flow of consciousness on the business of biological survival (brain doesn't create consciousness); surrounding this narrow, contracted field of profane consciousness is an indefinitely vast zone of possible experience. It is traffic with

this vast, circumambient mind at large that constitutes the well of "religious" experience. So, in light of this mind-brain theory, when Augustine said "If you seek the Truth, go within," we can take him to mean lower your defenses, dismantle the filters, and let the higher spirit and intelligence overflow into waking consciousness. This squares with Eastern thought, as when the Taoist advertises the virtues of *wu wei* or "non action"; i.e. an invitation to drop one's normal intellectual and emotional defenses in a very radical and deliberate way. Wisdom here is to do nothing to support the habitual repression, the narrowing and filtering of one's consciousness.

Influx may occur spontaneously, as it did in a famous case of a neuroscientist who had a stroke that wiped out her left-brain functions. Or one may try to induce the onset of influx, gradually, by techniques of meditation, fasting, or controlled breathing. Jeff Kripal's book provides a vision and a proliferation of concept-juggling exercises, all designed to inject new life into the sagging, academic bones of religious scholars. For friends of the fantastic, and daring devotees of the impossible, this book might serve as a breviary for metamorphosis.

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